

Organisations, careers and caring

More women with young children are remaining in employment. Many employers are introducing flexible policies designed to improve work-life balance, but do they enable women and men to build careers in parallel? Or does work intensification undermine family-friendly policy changes? This study, by Rosemary Crompton and Jane Dennett of City University London with Andrea Wigfield (Sheffield University), interviewed men and women in the banking, supermarket retail and local government sectors in East Kent/Canterbury and Sheffield. It found that:

-  Work-life policies were being visibly improved in the organisations studied, and employees appreciated these new opportunities. However, despite opportunities for part-time and flexible working, upward career development and family responsibilities were seen as incompatible by many employees, particularly women, because they considered that promotion to managerial posts meant having to work full-time, often entailing long hours.
-  Nonetheless, an employment history that includes career breaks and/or flexible working did not prohibit career development in retail and was becoming less prohibitive in banking and local government.
-  In banking and local government, employees with specific skills (particularly professionals) or who worked on specific projects (rather than service delivery) were more able to take advantage of work-life policies.
-  Lower-level employees, particularly in retail, were widely enabled to work hours and arrange flexibility that accommodated their family responsibilities. However, these jobs were often low paid and did not generate sufficient income to provide the sole support for a family.
-  Work intensification meant that some employees – particularly in service-delivery – often failed to take advantage of their organisation's policies, largely because they thought their colleagues would suffer as a result.
-  Men and women who worked longer hours than they would like did so in order to make themselves eligible for promotion, compensate for low wages, and under pressure from work intensification.
-  Mothers still took the major responsibility for child care. However, fathers were increasingly involved, particularly in cases of 'shift parenting', where both parents were in employment and childcare responsibilities were managed around two jobs.
-  All employees recognised that employers' good intentions formulated in provisions for flexible working could be swept aside by short-term business priorities and constraints. In consequence, improvements in employment practices are likely to need the development of systematic public policies to address these issues.

Background

Since the 1980s, it has increasingly become the norm for mothers of young children, even children under school age, to remain in paid employment. In 2001, 57 per cent of mothers with children under five were in paid work. Employers and policy-makers have responded to these changes by developing policies of work-life integration, including flexible working, career breaks and carers' leave of varying kinds. At the same time, organisations have faced an increasingly competitive business environment. 'High commitment' management, directed at raising standards of employee performance through 'cultures of excellence', has been implemented, as has the development of cost savings via organisational restructuring and removing layers of management (or 'delayering').

Recent managerial developments have been associated with the ending of the single organisation 'bureaucratic' career, and an increase in the individual's own responsibility for career development (the 'portfolio' career), in which people move from job to job, company to company. In principle, this should mean that individuals (particularly women) should be less affected by discontinuous employment records and flexible working than in the past. More negatively, organisational 'delayering' has opened up the 'gap' in the job ladder between lower-grade employees and the first step on the promotional ladder, and organisational restructuring has increased the intensity of work for many employees.

Against the background of these changes, this study set out to:

- Explore the impact of flexible working and employment breaks on individual careers for men and women in three contrasting employment sectors.
- Assess the impact of organisational culture on the take-up and impact of family-friendly policies and if such policies are contradicted by basic assumptions such as long hours working.
- Explore men's attitudes to family-friendly working arrangements.

Employment breaks, flexible working, and employment careers

Building on the foundation of an earlier study in the same organisations ('Employers, communities and family-friendly employment policies', *Findings* Ref:

972, September 2002), this study compared the careers of individuals who had taken employment breaks (flexible employment options) with those who had not done so in the retail banking, supermarket retail and local government sectors in East Kent/Canterbury and Sheffield.

In the bank branches and Sheffield and Canterbury city councils, individuals with full-time unbroken employment records (usually men) had progressed further up the organisational hierarchy. This reflected the history of bureaucratic career development within these organisations. In both sectors, career breaks and the possibility of part-time work were now on offer. In the past decade, the retail bank had introduced policies making it easier for people to take breaks and return to part-time work at their previous employment level. Some women with young children had benefited from this.

The supermarket employees had more varied employment histories, and usually had not been with the company for long. A fragmentary employment record was not a barrier to a career in the supermarket, which had good family-friendly policies. These were much appreciated by lower-level employees, who often worked part-time. However, these jobs were often low paid and did not generate sufficient income to provide the sole support for a family. Most supermarket managers worked full-time and put in long hours. Their jobs were not seen as family-friendly by either the managers or by more junior staff.

In all three sectors, managerial jobs were usually full-time and most managers worked longer hours than contracted. These requirements were widely understood.

"I like my job and I want to work. I couldn't sit at home but I wouldn't let it affect my family life to be a manager. The higher up women go, they tend not to have kids."

(Female bank employee)

The researchers found that an employment history that includes career breaks and/or flexible working is not prohibitive to career development in retail and is becoming less important in other sectors of employment as well. Nevertheless, in all three sectors, getting promoted will usually involve full-time working, and managers are expected to work extra hours. This is seen as a disincentive by those who have, or are anticipating, family or caring responsibilities.

Organisational cultures and work-life integration

Organisations seeking to develop 'cultures of excellence' have wanted employees to believe in and take responsibility for organisational goals. 'Family-friendly' policies are often incorporated into these developments. At the same time, organisations have also been seeking to become more efficient by using fewer staff to deliver the same services. This study found that, although employees appreciated work-life policies, pressures of work often meant that they could not take advantage of them. Bank employees had to meet sales targets, and were concerned about the impact on their colleagues if they stayed away from work. Many council employees felt similar pressures. However, in the councils, there were more people working on projects or in professional jobs where it was possible to make up work after absence without affecting colleagues. The supermarkets' policies were generous, but lower-level employees lost pay if they missed shifts, and employee absence was largely covered by managers working extra hours.

Although average weekly hours worked in Britain are amongst the highest in Europe (43.6 as compared to the 39.6 EU average), this is not necessarily because people *choose* to work long hours. Line managers, or people hoping to be promoted to management positions, can be working longer hours because this is implicitly required.

**"I have worked 70 hours a week in the past. I put in the hours when I need to. That's part of being a manager but you're never really asked to."
(Supermarket manager)**

People who are paid overtime can also work longer hours to make up low wages. Others can work long hours, or fail to take leave to which they are entitled, because of the increased workload that would fall on their colleagues.

In the supermarket and bank, work-life policies, as well as the nature of the services marketed by the companies, were determined at national level. As a consequence, the researchers found little variation in the way work-life policies were implemented in these companies. In contrast, in the councils the nature of work and the provision of services are more complex, and managerial discretion was more important. Both councils had flexitime systems which were widely used to achieve work-life balance.

Today's families and work-life integration

Among the women interviewed, all of the mothers aged over 45 had taken a break from employment. In contrast, of the 30 women interviewed whose youngest child was aged ten or under, only three had taken a break from employment. In families with young children, most mothers took the major responsibility for childcare (many mothers worked part-time). However, many fathers of young children took a major role in caring for their children. In some families with two working parents, both men and women arranged their hours to accommodate childcare, and roles were shared more or less equally ('shift parenting'). Some men had taken on major childcare responsibilities as a result of unemployment. This kind of male-biased parenting, however, usually occurred as a consequence of unemployment or redundancy. Only one of the men interviewed had voluntarily changed his working hours (i.e. taken a part-time job) because of caring responsibilities. However, three women reported that their partners had changed their jobs or working hours to help with childcare.

Caring and careers

It was widely recognised by men and women that it is difficult to combine career development with family responsibilities.

**"I now don't aim for the top. There is more to life than work. My perspective has changed, I must admit. It has a lot to do with my daughter."
(Male bank manager)**

More women than men had lowered their career aspirations because of their families. Nevertheless, some women had had successful careers despite the demands of their employment.

**"My boss ... felt that it was the woman's job to stay at home ... I was determined to prove otherwise."
(Female council manager)**

In balancing their work and family lives, people make choices from within the constraints available. Career opportunities may be limited by organisational restructuring and/or because of a lack of individual qualifications. In all three sectors, career building might mean geographical relocation. Both men and

women have to earn sufficient to support their families, but both recognised the negative aspects of career development.

"If you are the sort of person who doesn't mind picking up your roots and moving every couple of years to heighten your career development, there are opportunities ... But if you want to build a family life and your children are at school so you can't heave them up all the time and move them around the country, then it's quite limited what's available to you."

(Female bank manager)

Conclusion

The last two decades have seen substantial changes within both families and organisations. Mothers have increasingly remained in employment, and organisations have undergone radical change. Long-established job hierarchies have been swept away, and more flexible ways of working have been widely adopted. Nevertheless, there remain important elements of continuity in both employment and family life. These stem from taken-for-granted assumptions about the requirements of managerial and supervisory jobs, and 'gendered' responsibilities for the unpaid work of caring. Bureaucratic hierarchies may have been jettisoned, but even junior managerial jobs are seen to require full-time working and extra hours if necessary. These expectations make a major contribution to the 'long hours culture' in Britain. Women still take the major responsibility for caring and domestic work, and are less likely to want or be able to 'put in the hours' to develop a career.

Both male and female employees in the three sectors supported the introduction of family-friendly policies in their organisations. However, in all sectors managers found it more difficult to take advantage of the flexibility on offer and thus individual career development often has negative consequences for family life. They were acutely aware of the tensions between the demands of the business enterprise and caring and family responsibilities.

"A company doesn't employ you to care for your parents, does it? They employ you to work, looking at it from the business point of view."

(Male bank manager)

'Family-friendly' employer policies are all too easily over-ridden by the demands of the competitive enterprise. Thus employer provisions need to be supported by government policies that recognise these demands and seek to counter their negative impacts as far as family life is concerned.

About the project

The research drew upon 126 work-life history interviews with 84 female and 42 male employees in the three sectors in two localities. Some interviewees had taken an employment break, switched to part-time work, or taken up flexible employment opportunities, and some had not. People (invariably women) who had had such 'flexible' employment careers were matched with those who had not. The interviews were transcribed, and analysed using a computer-aided qualitative data analysis package.

How to get further information

The full report, **Organisations, careers and caring** by Rosemary Crompton, Jane Dennett and Andrea Wigfield, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press as part of the Family and Work series (ISBN 1 86134 500 3, price £13.95).